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# Author, Author!

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## SCENE II: OPENING NIGHT

### Thursday, June 20

I can't breathe. The technical elements remain miserable, and the cast is still searching for lines and direction, much less honesty and character.

But the show, despite its problems, is not a total disaster. It just isn't ready. Both Daniel and Michael sheepishly avoid me at the party afterward, and I give private thanks to the French for champagne.

## SCENE III: THE AFTERMATH

### Sunday, June 23, and beyond

Ah, the critics. God love 'em.

Jackie decides not to review the show and instead hands off that responsibility to a local playwright, Joseph McDonaugh, who also has a show opening in Cincinnati and is thus dependent on Jackie for reviews. Nonetheless, Jackie attends the show (dressed in highlighter pink), sits next to Joe and spends all of intermission talking his ear off.

His review begins:

JOSEPH: "New Edgecliff has been known for producing some challenging and respected work. Sadly, *Southern Discomfort* misfires in almost every way. . . .

"Director Daniel Selznick tries to keep the mayhem zipping along, but Mr. Cook's mind-boggling tone changes snuff out both the comedy and the drama. . . . You'll laugh, you'll cry, your jaw will hang open in disbelief."

Rick Pender from *CityBeat*, a Cincinnati arts publication, writes what I consider the smartest (and fairest) review.

RICK: "*Southern Discomfort* wants to be a very zany, dark piece of comedy, and at moments it achieves that. Unfortunately, a lethargic pace — inspired by a script that often talks too much — and a set of performers, each talented in their own right, who never quite jell as an ensemble, prevent it from succeeding. . . . *Southern Discomfort* is not without its entertaining moments, but Cook's script needs more focus and balance to succeed as a satisfying comedy. NET should be congratulated for helping that cause and advancing the career of a promising writer."

Painful as the reviews are, I am genuinely excited about each successive performance because the show, now using performances as rehearsals, is finally beginning to take its proper shape. The actors stop worrying about their lines and begin focusing on the truth of their characters. Transitions are smoother, and comedic moments are actually funny as opposed to worrisome. Even the technical elements improve, though at this point I enjoy guessing which characters will be left in total darkness during the course of the show.

By the next Saturday night, the last performance I see before returning to New York, the show is in great shape, and for the first time I am able to look at it with a critical eye and see what I need to tighten and clarify for future productions. Laughs are huge and constant in the first act, and I hear people crying and sniffing during the second act. I hear which lines are clunking and need to be replaced, and I can see the elements of the show that are really, truly working. And yes, it is now more than clear that the fabled Scene Two, already chopped to death, needs to be halved.

Make no mistake: the audience is the real test. And fortunately, word of mouth on the show is strong. Performances the week after the opening are well attended and almost sell out on the weekend, and it is only a few weeks before I hear from Daniel again.

He wants more rewrites.

Another pattern emerges, and the madness continues. ●

STEVE FRIEDMAN



Randall David Cook shares a moment with Anne Close, "Dixie" at the inaugural reading of *Southern Discomfort*.

## Author, Author!

After graduating cum laude from Furman in 1991 with a degree in business administration and a place in *Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges*, Randall David Cook primed himself for a career in international business.

For two years the former *Paladin* editor lived in rural Japan, working as an assistant English teacher in two junior high schools. Upon his return to the States, he enrolled in the international business program at the University of South Carolina, spent most of 1995 in Paris as an intern with Total, France's largest petro-chemical company, and earned his master's degree in 1996.

At which time he moved to New York City and, in his words, "immediately refused to have a corporate career."

Instead, filled with fantasies of a life in the theatre, he sought fame and fortune there. But after his first jobs on the theatrical (more like lunatic) fringe proved somewhat disconcerting, he reconsidered and put his dreams on hold while putting his degrees to use. Eventually, he discovered that he could apply his business acumen toward a higher purpose: supporting his playwrighting jones. Little did he know that his first effort would take him on the roller-coaster ride he describes on these pages.

Since beginning his long day's journey with *Southern Discomfort*, he has written five other plays that are now in various stages of development. All have been read or performed off-Broadway — or off-off-Broadway. *Sake With the Haiku Geisha* won the 2001 Southeast Region Playwrights' Award for Best Play and was a finalist for the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference and the Charlotte Play Award. *Third Finger, Left Hand*, produced by the Regardez-Nous Theatre Co., played to strong reviews this fall at New York's Flatiron Playhouse, and *English* was selected for The PAL Company Disaster Relief Playfest in late October.

At the end of the year, Cook plans to leave his position with a financial Web site and devote himself to writing for stage and screen. His experiences have armed him with a thicker skin, an extra dose of assertiveness, a talent for laughing at himself and at life's follies, and a fuller understanding of the phrase "hurry up and wait."

More to the point, his confidence in his ability to make a living as a full-time writer does not appear to be misplaced. To quote NewYorktheatre.com, "Playwright Randall David Cook is talented and imaginative . . . he's certainly a writer to keep an eye on."

As long as he avoids the hot buttered bourbon.

— Jim Stewart